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ABSTRACT

Controlled compositions are a partial answer to the challenge faced by basic skills teachers of giving their students enough writing practice without increasing their own grading load. This method is especially suitable for academically underprepared students, English-as-a-second language students, highly apprehensive students, students who hate grammar, and those who cannot think of anything to write. With this method, students copy well-written short compositions, changing each one in some meaningful way. They learn punctuation in context, and they develop fluency, continuity, and proofreading skills. In grading, the teacher simply circles each error, and the student must figure out what is wrong. Any response that makes sense should be acceptable. Grading may also be done by tutors or aides with a simple answer key, leaving the teacher free to help more with original writing. Students in a pilot course using controlled compositions in combination with free writing increased their fluency by 17%, and reduced their mechanical errors by 43%. A matched group studying traditional sentence stucture did not increase fluency at all and reduced their errors by only 15%. (Author/HTH)

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CONTROLLED COMPOSITIONS: MORE PRACTICE FOR STUDENTS, LESS GRADING FOR INSTRUCTORS

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No truth is more universally acknowledged in American higher education today than the need for improving students' writing skills. It is also generally agreed that more writing practice is necessary to achieve that end. The challenge to teachers of composition and basic skills is clear: how do we give students enough writing practice to improve their effectiveness without burning ourselves out grading papers?

A partial answer lies in the use of controlled compositions. This method is suitable for a wide range of student abilities. Able students enjoy it, but it is also effective with academically underprepared students, those who flounder in grammar studies, students of English as a second language, rusty returnees, high-anxiety types, and those who can't think of anything to say.

The Method

Here's how the method works. Students copy well-written short compositions, changing each one in some meaningful way, such as from present to past, singular to plural, slang to standard English, and so on. Or they may combine selected sentences within the composition to form appositives, compound sentences, adjective clauses, adverbial clauses, etc. They learn the appropriate punctuation in context as they make these changes. In effect, they are playing the game in order to learn the rules.

Basically, controlled compositions are a means of learning to write

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by imitation, but they are not mindless copying. The student must manipulate the passages thoughtfully, but he or she can concentrate on just one concept at a time. Thus even the student who has had repeated failure experiences can write a perfect paper.

Students should copy the entire passage, not just cross out and replace words. In this way they develop fluency, a sense of continuity, and proofreading skills. If students make more than three errors on one controlled composition, they should re-do at least those sentences in which the errors occur. Even better results can be obtained by re-doing the whole paper to get a perfect copy, because this task resembles revision tasks in the world of work. However, students should not have to re-do an exercise more than once. They should move on to a more difficult assignment.

Grading of controlled compositions is quick and easy. The instructor quickly becomes familiar with each exercise and can scan it in the student's presence. By merely circling errors and asking the student to explain what's missing or wrong, the instructor encourages him to think for himself. Tutors or student aides can also be trained to grade controlled compositions with a key. In some instances, more than one response may be acceptable. The grader should accept any response that makes sense, even if it differs from the suggested version in the answer key.

This method has limitations, of course. It should be supplemented by such methods as free writing, journal keeping, sentence combining, clustering, and original compositions. Once students have been exposed to the good writing in controlled compositions, however, their original writing improves as they draw upon the patterns and structures they have absorbed.

Effectiveness of the Method

To test the effectiveness of controlled compositions in reducing

mechanical errors and increasing fluency, a pilot course in basic writing was conducted at Sacramento City College in fall, 1978. Although the class was a remedial course, students ranged in ability from some who were eligible for regular freshman English to some who were learning disabled. All made measurable gains. The achievement of these students over a semester was compared to that of a carefully matched group who studied traditional sentence structure. The two groups were comparable in entrance exam scores, high school English grades, age range, sex ratio, and number of foreign students enrolled. Both groups were taught by experienced and dedicated instructors.

The experimental group used thirty controlled compositions, sequenced according to difficulty, along with free writing and the writing of original sentences from stimulus words (clustering). As measured by essays on uniform topics at the beginning and end of the semester, students in the experimental group reduced their mechanical errors by 43 percent and increased fluency by 17 percent. The traditional students, in contrast, reduced their errors by only 15 percent and did not increase fluency at all. In fact, they wrote, on the average, 10 percent fewer words than they had at the beginning of the semester. All instructors involved considered the gains of the experimental group to be significant (not statistically significant, however, because the sample was not randomized). Further details of this research may be found in the author's doctoral dissertation, "A Comparison of Fragmented and Holistic Modes of Instruction in Remedial Writing," ERIC document CCM000134.

Applications of the Method

The applications of this method are as variable as students themselves. A business instructor, for example, could apply this technique to business letters and reports. Instructors in vocational and technical programs could select materials of special interest to their students.

Instructors of students with low self-esteem can select materials from self-help books with a strong "can do" flavor. Following are two samples of controlled compositions in the last category.

Sample Exercise No. 1 -- Writing About Men and Women

DIRECTIONS: Rewrite the passage below in your own notebook. Change it so that it describes a woman instead of a man. Put a box around each of your changes, proofread the whole paper to be sure it makes sense, and then see your instructor or aide to compare your paper to the answer key. Pronouns you will need to change are underlined. Your first sentence, when changed, will read like this:

The healthy personality is a person who likes herself.

The Healthy Personality

The healthy personality is a person who likes himself. He likes other people and accepts their faults as well as his own. He acts naturally, without pretending to be anything he is not. He prefers to face an unpleasant reality rather than retreat to a pleasant fantasy. Usually his behavior is like that of his friends, but he can be different if necessary. His moral values are the highest; he wants justice and fairness for all people. Being alone is no problem for him, and he stays true to his beliefs even when all others seem to be against him.

He feels a sense of belonging to mankind as a whole, so he does not discriminate against people because of race, social class, or religion. When he sees an injustice, he is likely to speak out against it. Although he enjoys the company of others, he is not dependent on them. Close friends of his make up a comparatively small group, but their relationship to him is deep, meaningful, and lasting. He has a tender love for children. And, like a child, he sees the world freshly; he can appreciate again and again the beauty in ordinary things--a sunset, a flower, a baby, a person.

Sample Exercise No. 2 -- Practice in Using You Consistently

DIRECTIONS: Rewrite this passage in your own notebook. Change it from a formal passage using "one" and "he" to an informal passage using "you" forms. Be consistent all through the paper. Put a box around each change you make, proofread the whole paper to be sure you have been consistent, and see your instructor to compare your paper to the answer key. Your first sentence, when changed, will look like this:

> If [you] [are] hypnotized and told that [you] [are] at the North Pole, [you] will not only shiver and appear cold, but also develop goose bumps.

The Secret of Hypnotic Power

(Adapted from Psycho-cybernetics, by Maxwell Maltz)*

If one is hypnotized and told that he is at the North Pole, he will not only shiver and appear cold, but also develop goose bumps. The same amazing thing happens if he is told to imagine that one hand is being held under ice water; his temperature will drop in that hand. When he is convinced that the hypnotist's statements are true, he behaves differently because he thinks and believes differently. When he is convinced that he cannot feel pain, he can undergo surgery without an anesthetic.

He acts and feels, not according to what things are really like, but according to the image his mind holds of what they are like. He has certain mental images of himself, his world, and the people around him, and he behaves as if these images were true.

If one sees himself as clumsy, he will behave in clumsy ways. If he sees himself as a poor speller, his spelling will surely be poor. On the other hand, if he believes he can learn, he will work at learning and succeed at it. Whether he thinks he can or cannot do something, he is right.

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Composition Theory and Professional Literature

The controlled composition method effectively applies current composition theory. It is an appropriate technique for the "new student" described by Patricia Cross (2) who prefers activity to lectures. It provides the much-needed practice recommended by Shaughnessy (12), Sykes (15), D'Eloia (3), Lunsford (9), and many others. More important, this kind of practice provides positive models in a context, not just isolated drills, and yet it works toward the correctness students themselves desire.

As an alternative to grammar and usage drills, controlled compositions make a constructive contribution. The general public's ardent belief that grammar and usage drills will cure students' writing deficiencies flies in the face of a substantial body of research. Summarizing over 50 years of this research, Dunning and Sledd (4) listed several "knowns" leading to the recommendations by the National Council of Teachers of English for teaching writing:

> 1. That isolated drills in usage, formal grammar, phonics, and spelling have little value. These skills are best learned in a context.
> 2. That most students learn to write and read by performing real tasks: writing letters, notices, stories, reports for a class audience, etc.
> 3. That drills may be useful following diagnosis of weakness in a specific area, but not as a substitute for whole writing tasks.
> 4. That students need help during the writing process.
> 5. That sentence building is more productive than analysis or labeling.

Similar conclusions may be drawn from the third National Assessment of Writing, a federally financed effort to measure writing performance in the nation's schools between 1969 and 1979. Of the broad sampling of nine-, thirteen-, and seventeen-year-old students, most had a grasp of grammar and punctuation but showed weakened ability to write persuasively and with sophistication (11). These findings were interpreted as an unfortunate by-product of the back-to-basics emphasis upon simple skills. By using controlled compositions, however,

the instructor can follow the recommendations of N.C.T.E. and also assist students in developing style.

Copying as a means of learning style was a much-utilized method in the Eighteenth Century, and many practitioners are now recommending its revival. William Gruber (7) reported amazing improvement in his students' writing through "servile copying" of the style of Mark Twain and other writers. Daniel Fader (5) also advocated copying in his 1976 book The New Hooked On Books. He told an anecdote about a youth in a detention facility who had "nothing to write about" for his journal, but when allowed to copy Time Magazine for six weeks, improved not only his writing but his participation in social studies classes. Edward Corbett and Barrett Mandel (10) suggest that copying model passages allows students the experience of producing mature prose without consciously conceptualizing it first--in other words, bypassing the analytical left hemisphere of the brain and experiencing insightfully with the right hemisphere.

Research on brain hemisphericity by Brandwein and Ornstein (1) and others is giving us insight into why holistic methods of instruction work. The left hemisphere controls language, rational cognition, sequential concepts, and analysis of details. The right hemisphere controls intuitive thinking, spatial perceptions, holistic and generalizing perceptions.. Hunter (8), Sperry (14), Samples (12), and Galin (6) point out that education (especially in reading and writing) rewards left-brain activities more than right-brain ones. They plead for greater symmetry in development. Because controlled compositions permit the holistic imitation of patterns as well as accurate perception of details, they teach to both halves of the brain.

Sound in theory, effective in practice, and simple to implement, controlled composition can be a useful technique for both teachers and students.

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